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Re: Resignation from the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services

To Whom It May Concern:

I, Monica T. Knighton, am resigning from my Human Resources Specialist IV position effective August 31, 2022. The stress from working in a hostile work environment has affected my health. I have not given at least a 2 weeks' notice because I would be forced out before the end of the month as retaliation for this letter.

The hostile work environment started when Chris Evaro became the Director for the Hiring Division of Human Resources. The bullying, intimidating, and threatening behavior (to include yelling at women) became more intense in July 2021 and was focused directly on the Region 7 hiring team. I was told that "Region 7 is a problem" without an explanation of what this meant.

The Region 7 hiring team was the most experienced in the entire state with staff having previous work experience in Child Protective Services (CPS) management. I was previously Regional Operations Support Administrator in CPS in Region 7. Other coworkers were previously Program Directors or Supervisors in CPS. All of us had years of experience hiring program level staff.

Of the 14 staff on our team in August 2021, only 3 remain with a total of 12 resignations as of August 31, 2022. The manager level position was vacated twice during this period. This means that 86% of the staff employed in the unit as of August 2021 are no longer with the agency. The behavior of management is the sole reason for the exodus of these staff. Some of the staff have given various reasons for leaving and some have told the truth about why they were leaving. Why is no one asking questions about this? The agency's most experienced hiring staff are leaving. The team hires almost the same number (sometimes more) of applicants each Monday as the larger regions. Doesn't anyone understand that when you have experienced hiring staff leave this affects child safety?

I read an article this week about how the agency was going to address the turnover of staff; the answer was to "ramp up recruitment". This response puts the entire problem to the lowest level in the agency – the hiring staff. This means that we are threatened to hire 8, 10, or more applicants per month per hiring specialist (yes, we have a "quota" for hiring child welfare workers). This means we are competing with our coworkers (some from other parts of the state) to hire the few available applicants in my area. Why are we competing? We do not have an applicant pool

locally (the 30 counties in Central Texas) so all of us are screening and trying to interview the same applicant pool.

Not all 4-year college graduates are a fit for working in child welfare; however, this is the message we have received. Unless the applicant was inappropriate during the interview or clearly unfit, the applicant must be hired. Do we need caseworkers and support staff? Yes absolutely! At what cost?

When we hire applicants that can't demonstrate a "passion or desire" to work in the child welfare field, we are setting the applicant up for failure. The caseworker positions are not positions you go into because you "need a job". We are using agency resources to hire, train, and supervise new hires that aren't going to stay or need to be terminated. It all becomes a vicious cycle with tenured staff leaving because the new hires never become case assignable or leave cases behind that must now be worked by the remaining staff.

Human Resources wants to have "numbers". They want to say "look" at how many people we have been able to hire. Here's the reality – as of May 31, 2022, we have hired and termed staff in the following positions statewide:

Position Type	Hired	Termed
CPS Investigators	1082	-995
CPS Conservatorship Worker	632	-643

Clearly, the agency can't "ramp up recruitment" its way out of this problem. This is not a new problem for the agency but, in my over 21 years employed here, I've never seen it this bad. And it's this bad because HR management will not institute solutions that work. We have proposed solutions (I would be happy to talk about them); however, that would require HR and other agency management to "do something". Why do something when you can threaten the hiring staff to just fill vacancies with "bodies". Where are the retention efforts? Recruitment (of the appropriate applicants) and retention efforts are the only way out of this cycle.

New hires and tenured staff are leaving, and the turnover data shows it. Here's the information for Region 7 CPS Investigators:

CPS Investigator I (less than 9 months tenure)	69.4%
CPS Investigator II (more than 9 months tenure)	55.2%
CPS Investigator III (18 months or more tenure)	36.4%
CPS Investigator IV (24 months or more tenure)	22.2%

When tenured staff leave, it affects new staff as it is difficult to find mentors among the tenured staff. When new staff aren't trained appropriately, they are overwhelmed with the job and leave. Thus, the 69.4% turnover rate for CPS Investigator I in the data above. This affects child safety. If new staff aren't trained appropriately by tenured employees, poor decisions are made. Especially since we have mostly new supervisors in my area (supervisor turnover is a problem also). This will result in children being removed from their families, maybe unnecessarily, or left in unsafe situations.

Child Without Placement (CWOP) affects retention also. I had a new hire tell me that he worked his 8-hour shift, then drove 2 hours to his CWOP shift, worked an 8-

hour CWOP shift (worked 4 extra hours because his replacement never showed up), drove 2 hours home and then reported to work for his regular shift. His wife is an agency employee, and she had the same CWOP situation happen to her. They have a child and realize both could no longer work for the agency at the same time. Even though he enjoyed working as a CPS Investigator, he realized that his child needed supervision also. He resigned and found another job.

The regional hiring positions were created to hire for program caseworkers and support staff across the state. We hire for all program areas – Child Protective Services, Adult Protective Services, Residential Child Care Investigations, Child Care Investigations (Day Care), Statewide Intake Division, and the DFPS Background Check Unit. Our Human Resources Division has indicated that having the program areas participate in the interviews is a “luxury”. References for applicants are not to be shared with the program management staff. If the program areas have a problem with being able to see references for their prospective employees, then “they can do their own hiring”. How can the program areas be excluded from the hiring process for employees that will report directly to them?

As if this all wasn’t enough, we have a manager from Region 6 supervising our unit. She has furthered the hostile environment with the support of HR management. Inconsistent communication to unit staff has resulted in offers for employment being delayed or denied. I had an excellent Adult Protective Services caseworker applicant from California; he was a recent college graduate with a detailed reference from his college advisor/professor. This professor provided me with information regarding the applicant’s character, work ethic, and academic performance. This applicant attended his classes while working part-time at the local community college with 1st generation college students while also being the primary caregiver for his dying grandfather. However, because I hadn’t been able to get a reference from his last employer (the community college job), his offer would be denied. I was able to get the reference once I explained to the supervisor and applicant that I couldn’t get the offer approved without it. This applicant made a 10-hour round trip from his home in the central valley of California to Los Angeles County to get fingerprinted for this position. This excellent applicant would have been denied employment because of a reference from a part-time college position.

We are forced to complete onerous processes to hire applicants that have nothing to do with getting qualified applicants into caseworker positions. I understand that the process is important to ensure that we are following federal and state laws and the agency’s policies and procedures. These processes have nothing to do with these requirements, take unnecessary time, slow the hiring process, and frustrate the few applicants we have for these positions.

The initial screening criteria for a CPS Specialist allows for applicants with at least 60 college credit hours and 2 or more years of “related” experience. The related experience must explain how it directly relates to the applicant’s ability to function as a CPS Specialist. This can require the applicant to update their application. We now must “justify” in writing why we are interviewing applicants that meet this criterion **before** we schedule the interview with the applicant.

Applicants with childcare experience do not meet the "related" work experience to be interviewed unless they have other related work experience. Why are we excluding childcare work experience? These applicants have experience working with children and parents. Some have had to report suspected abuse and neglect. These workers regularly interact with HHSC Childcare Regulation (CCR) staff and DFPS Childcare Investigators. They are familiar with CCR minimum standards for childcare operations. We hire childcare workers with 4-year college degrees into child abuse and neglect investigator positions in the Childcare Investigations Division with pay less than \$2,800 per month. The positions are not the same. This makes no sense.

We are also reviewing the grades on college transcripts for applicants. If the applicant has "D's or F's" in core subjects but still graduated, we shouldn't consider them for hire. As I like to remind people, we had 2 governors (with one becoming president of the United States) that graduated from college with a 2.0 grade point average! Why are we looking at grades if the applicant graduated? We don't know what was going on during those semesters for that applicant. They were still able to accomplish the goal of graduation from college. Applicants without college degrees but with extensive related work experience are denied consideration for employment if their grades are D's and F's but otherwise have the number of college hours required.

Some of the processes are unethical. I was required to submit an offer for an applicant that we did not have a position for in the location (rural office with only 3 positions), where there are only 2 CPS conservatorship positions. Both positions were filled. This applicant would receive a "conditional offer" for a position that didn't exist. Applicants must pay for FBI fingerprinting and TB testing to complete the hiring process. So, this applicant would have been out of this money without an actual position available. I was told that we would hold her "conditional offer" for 60-plus days and if we didn't have a vacancy in her home location, we would offer her a vacancy somewhere else, and we could count this applicant in our "numbers" from the hiring fair!

I have so many more examples!

The "numbers" only tell part of the story of what's going on in our agency. There are **people** behind the data. We need management to step up and do what's right. The history of the agency since I have been employed is that we do what's right **eventually** when we can't do anything else. Will it take resources to do it, absolutely! Where are the resources? We have vacancies, so where has that money gone?

I'm not a "disgruntled" employee. I have been a state employee for 33 years. I have loved my time working for the agency. I believe in the mission of our agency otherwise I wouldn't have been employed here for 21 years. I would still be in my position if a target wasn't on my back for over a year. I've had to go on medication

because the environment has caused stress related health issues. We know too much, ask too many questions, provide too much feedback (have too many ideas/solutions), and have been around too long (as in old and make too much money). We are belittled in front of our peers when we point out legitimate issues. No one with experience can work in this environment, and I guess that's the point.

A friend reminded me that employees like me and my coworkers care about the mission – the families and children. We understand how our work is connected to this mission. Some others only care about their ambition and their relationships with people that can help them fulfill that ambition. They are not working towards the agency's mission. I pray my friend's observation is not true.

Sincerely,


Monica T. Knighton